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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 002218

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [KJUS](#) [KCRM](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT ESTRADA ANNOUNCES PRESIDENTIAL RUN

REF: A. MANILA 1967 (SENATOR BLASTS ESTRADA)  
[1](#)B. 07 MANILA 3520 (ARROYO PARDONS ESTRADA)  
[1](#)C. 07 MANILA 3086 (ESTRADA CONVICTED)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Former President Joseph Estrada announced on October 21 his intention to run for President in 2010, with Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay as his running mate. Estrada, forced out of the presidential palace by a 2001 uprising, remains popular with a meaningfully large segment of the electorate despite well-known personal vices, a prior conviction for plunder, and widespread suspicion of culpability in a double murder now under investigation. An Estrada victory -- which we currently view as highly unlikely -- could complicate U.S.-Philippine relations, given the former President's connection to an American convicted of espionage. Most politically astute Filipinos believe the Supreme Court will eliminate Estrada from the race on constitutional grounds. Nevertheless, Estrada's maneuvering could affect the tone of the election campaign and position him to provide another candidate with a significant endorsement. Estrada has spoken out twice in recent days, calling for a more aggressive approach toward ending insurgencies. End Summary.

ESTRADA DECLARES HIS CANDIDACY

[1](#)2. (U) On October 21, former President Joseph "Erap" Estrada declared his candidacy for the 2010 presidential election. Makati Mayor Jejomar "Jojo" Binay will serve as Estrada's running mate on a ticket backed by the Force of the Philippine Masses Party (PMP -- formerly the Party of the Philippine Masses). He also named a full slate of Senatorial candidates who will run under his party, including Senate president Juan Ponce Enrile, Senators Jinggoy Estrada, Miriam Defensor Santiago and Aquilino Pimentel, Rep. Ferdinand Marcos Jr., arrested rebel leader Brig. Gen. Danilo Lim and ZTE scandal whistleblower Jose De Venecia III. Formal registration of candidacies will take place in late November.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Estrada, who rose to prominence as an actor, remains appealing to many Filipinos. Support for Estrada is strongest among the poorer and less-educated segments of the population. (He formally announced his candidacy -- "the last performance of my life" -- in Tondo, his birthplace and one of the poorest neighborhoods in Manila.) Credible polling organization Social Weather Stations has found that Estrada consistently ranks among the top tier of candidates. Most recently, when asked which person(s) they believed would be a suitable successor to President Arroyo, 18 percent of

surveyed Filipinos included Estrada's name in their response, giving him a higher ranking than other contenders except for Senator Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III (60 percent) and Senator Manuel Villar (37 percent). At this stage, Aquino and Villar are widely viewed as the front-runners.

¶4. (SBU) In the run-up to his announcement, Estrada placed multi-page ads in leading Manila newspapers that previewed his October 21 announcement. "True to the poor," the ads read, proclaiming it time to return power to the masses. The ads focused largely on the unconventional way in which Estrada was forced out of office in 2001, midway through his term, after the President's allies blocked impeachment proceedings and triggered an outburst of popular and elite outrage that brought his vice president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, to power. In his October 21 remarks, Estrada raised his 2001 ouster, complaining he had been "demonized then unconstitutionally removed."

#### HAWKISH ON INSURGENCY, DOVISH ON GAMBLING

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¶5. (SBU) In October 20 public remarks, Estrada called for an "all-out war against insurgencies," using language similar to that he had employed as President, when he gave primacy to military means against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), winning some battles but failing to achieve peace. When announcing his candidacy, Estrada again referred to the situation in the South, saying that the Arroyo administration "almost gave it up" when negotiating a subsequently aborted peace accord last year. MILF spokespersons on October 21

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denigrated both Estrada and his policies.

¶6. (SBU) Estrada also called for the legalization of jueteng, an illegal gambling game that targets poorer Filipinos. Estrada's involvement in jueteng was one of the contributing factors in his plunder conviction.

#### A QUESTIONABLE CANDIDACY

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¶6. (C) Our contacts generally agree that Estrada will prove unable to run in the 2010 election. Article VII, Section 4 of the Constitution reads: "The President shall not be eligible for any reelection." While Estrada advocates have sought to argue that this prohibition is open to interpretation, constitutional experts claim publicly that the drafters' intent was clear, and the language bars Estrada from again assuming the presidency. Senator Jinggoy Estrada, son of the former President, has told us recently that he expects that his father's opponents will challenge Erap's candidacy, and that the Supreme Court will disqualify the former President.

¶7. (C) Most in Manila's elite circles dread any prospect of Estrada's return to the presidential palace. Stories of Estrada's debauchery, corruption, and mismanagement abounded during his presidency. Widely thought of as a womanizer, gambler, and alcoholic, Estrada was convicted by the Philippine anti-graft court of plunder, based on charges that he received payoffs from illegal gambling operations, diverted excise taxes to his personal accounts, and profited from stock manipulation (ref B). Six weeks after his conviction, however, President Macapagal-Arroyo pardoned Estrada (ref C).

¶8. (SBU) Estrada's legal woes continue. In September, Senator (and former National Police Chief) Panfilo "Ping" Lacson insinuated in public remarks (ref A) that Estrada conspired in the 2000 murder of Estrada associate Salvador Dacer and his driver, Emmanuel Corbito. Two former police officers testifying in the case recently claimed in court proceedings that Lacson and Estrada were complicit in the killings, and Dacer family members are reportedly preparing

to file a formal complaint against the ex-President in connection with the murders.

#### ESPIONAGE

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¶9. (C) A second Estrada presidential term also could pose a special challenge for U.S.-Philippine relations. Credible international news organizations have reported that Estrada (along with Lacson) received classified U.S. material from former FBI analyst Leandro Aragoncillo, who pleaded guilty to U.S. espionage charges in 2006. Although we are not aware of official records in the public domain that establish Estrada conspired to commit espionage against the U.S., we do believe he was a principal recipient of Aragoncillo's material. As far as we have been able to determine, there is no U.S. indictment against Estrada, nor any continuing espionage investigation.

#### COMMENT

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¶10. (C) While the decade since his ouster as president have not worn well on the 72-year-old Estrada, he spoke forcefully and with conviction in his Tondo appearance. Many of Estrada's critics believe his primary motivation in running for office is to prove he still commands popular support, thereby providing him a form of redemption from what he firmly believes was an illegal ouster and conviction. A second motivation is to reestablish himself as a political player in order to gain resources or influence when he provides another candidate with an endorsement after his own disqualification. Nonetheless, Estrada seems determined to press his candidacy as far as he can, even in the face of a certain Supreme Court challenge from his political opponents -- a legal fight which even his son believes he cannot win. End Comment.

#### BIO NOTES

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¶11. (U) Joseph "Erap" Estrada, born in 1937, studied at the  
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Mapua Institute of College but ended his studies before earning a degree. He rose to prominence as an award-winning actor and film producer. He served as Mayor of San Juan City (in the greater Manila area) from 1969 until 1986. In 1987, he won election to the Senate, and then, in 1992, became Vice President in the Fidel Ramos administration, concurrently heading the Presidential Anti-Crime Commission. He was elected as President in 1998 and served approximately half his six-year term before being pushed out of office by a popular uprising. He and his wife have three children, one of whom holds a seat in the Senate; Estrada also has publicly admitted fathering children of women other than his wife.

¶12. (U) Jejomar "Jojo" Binay, born in 1942, served as Mayor of Makati (the most significant business district of the greater Manila area) for three consecutive terms, from 1988 until 1998. Term limits prohibited his reelection directly after his third term, so his wife held the mayoralty from 1998 until 2001, when Binay began his second string of terms in office. Trained as a lawyer, he holds an undergraduate degree from the University of the Philippines and master's degrees from the University of Santo Tomas and from the National Defense College of the Philippines. He has attended Harvard University in a Fellow Program. He and his wife have five children, two of whom hold elected office.

KENNEY